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Texas AG wants Web sites to protect young users

By JOHN MORITZ
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AUSTIN — After a Brenham man was arrested twice for allegedly using the Internet to proposition underage girls, Texas Attorney General Greg Abbott on Monday called for the operators of social networking Web sites to step up efforts to protect youngsters from sexual predators.

"Social networking site operators have made several adjustments to their safety protocols in the last few months, but site content should be monitored more carefully to keep sexual predators on the prowl from gaining access to our children online," Abbott said at a "cyber crimes summit" for law enforcement officials and high-tech companies in Austin.

Abbott announced at the summit that the cybersex crimes unit he originated soon after taking office in 2003 has arrested 80 people, including John David Payne of Brenham, who was taken into custody two weeks ago on charges of soliciting sex just five months after another arrest on a similar charge.

In both cases, Payne, 27, was chatting on the Web site MySpace.com with undercover investigators posing as teenage girls, Abbott said.

According to Abbott, Payne was arrested first on Dec. 29 after arranging to meet with a girl in Bastrop. Payne was indicted in Bastrop County last month on charges of attempted sexual performance by a child and attempted aggravated sexual assault of a child. While awaiting trial, he was arrested again in Washington County on two counts of online solicitation of a minor and criminal solicitation of a minor. Abbott's office is working with the Washington County district attorney on the case.

A MySpace representative said the company, which was established in January 2004 and has about 80 million members, regularly works with law enforcement agencies and the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children to protect its clients. The site contains safety information.

Customers must provide assurances that they are at least 14 years old before they may post a profile, but only the profiles of users 16 and older are visible to everyone. For someone to gain access to a profile of someone under 16, the youngster must specifically allow it.

"People aren't always who they say they are," reads a "safety tips" message on MySpace. "Be careful about adding strangers to your friends list. It's fun to connect with new MySpace friends from all over the world, but avoid meeting people in person whom you do not fully know. If you must meet someone, do it in a public place and bring a friend or trusted adult."

A message in the "tips for parents" section reads: "We take extra precautions to protect our younger members and we are not able to do so if they do not identify themselves as such. MySpace will delete users whom we find to be younger than 14, or those misrepresenting their age."

MySpace spokesman Jeff Berman said the company plans to work with Abbott's office to allay the attorney general's concerns.

"MySpace is firmly committed to providing a safe and well-lit environment for our community," Berman said.

Lauri Saathoff, a spokeswoman for Abbott's office, said the screening process can be easily compromised.

"Investigators have told us that it is too easy to get around it," Saathoff said. "The attorney general also wants these sites to use better filtering software that will detect any pornographic photographs or other inappropriate materials before they can be posted online."

Soliciting sex with a minor is a felony punishable by two to 20 years in prison and a fine of up to $10,000.

State Rep. Will Hartnett, a Dallas Republican who offered legislation last year that would have required Internet dating sites to either do client background checks or post a notice that they do not, applauded Abbott's push for tighter screening on other social networking sites. But he questioned whether the companies can be compelled to do so.

"Personally, I like the sound of what he's talking about," Hartnett said. "But when I was pushing my bill, the Internet community was vociferously against anything they thought would be an infringement on their free speech. The goal is worthy. It seems like every day we're reading in the media about these online predators. But politically, it would be hard to pass legislation."

Abbott also announced two other arrests Monday.

Benjamin Alexander David, 20, of Katy was arrested May 3 in Sugar Land on charges that he was attempting to meet a child he had met online for sex. Weston Lee Starks, 24, of Houston, was arrested at a Sugar Land apartment May 11 on charges of soliciting a teen for sex.

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